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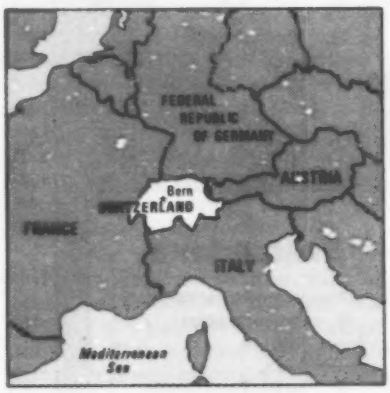
background notes

Switzerland

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs

March 1989



Official Name: Swiss Confederation

PROFILE

Geography

Area: 41,288 sq. km. (15,941 sq. mi.); about twice the size of New Jersey. **Cities:** *Capital*—Bern (pop. 137,000; metropolitan area pop., 266,100). *Other cities*—Zurich (349,600; metro area, 687,300), Basel (173,200; metro area, 301,900), Geneva (160,700; metro area, 249,800), Lausanne (124,200; metro area, 198,700). **Terrain:** Plateau, hills, mountains (Switzerland straddles the central ranges of the Alps). **Climate:** Temperate, varying with altitude and season.

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Swiss (sing. and pl.). **Population** (1988): 6.5 million. **Annual growth rate:** 0.3%. **Ethnic groups:** Mixed European. **Religions:** Roman Catholic 49%, Protestant 48%, Jewish 0.3%. **Languages:** German 65%, French 18%, Italian 10%, Romansch 1%, other 6%. **Education:** *Years compulsory*—9. *Attendance*—100%. *Literacy*—100%. **Health:** *Infant mortality rate*—7/1,000. *Life expectancy*—men 73.6 yrs., women 80.3 yrs. **Work force** (3.1 million): *Agriculture*—5%. *Industry and commerce*—39%. *Services*—52%. *Government*—4%.

Government

Type: Federal state. **Independence:** The first Swiss confederation was founded in August 1291 as a defensive alliance among three cantons. **Constitution:** 1848; extensively amended in 1874.

Branches: *Executive*—Federal Council, collegiate of seven members, one of whom is elected president for a 1-yr. term. *Legislative*—Federal Assembly (bicameral: Council of States, 46 members; National Council, 200 members). *Judicial*—Federal Tribunal.

Administrative subdivisions: 26 cantons (states) with considerable autonomy (20 are full and 6 "half" cantons for purposes of representation in the national legislature).

Political parties: Free Democrats, Christian Democrats, Swiss People's (all conservative), Social Democrats, and several smaller parties representing localities, or views from extreme left to extreme right. **Suffrage:** In federal matters, universal over 20.

Central government budget (1988): $17.4 billion. *Surplus*—$850 million.

Defense (1988): 19% of central government budget (after social security, health).

Flag: Square, white cross on red field.

Economy

GDP (1987): $171 billion. **Annual growth rate:** 2.5% in real terms. **Per capita income:** $26,309. **Avg. inflation rate** (1987): 1.4%.

Natural resources: Water power, timber, salt.

Agriculture (3% of GNP): *Products*—dairy, livestock, grains, fruit and vegetables, potatoes, wine. *Arable land*—25%.

Industry (40% of GNP): *Types*—machinery, precision instruments, watches, drugs, chemicals, textiles, tourism, banking, insurance.

Trade (1987): *Exports*—$45 billion: power equipment and electric appliances, instruments, watches, chemicals and dyestuffs, drugs, industrial machinery, yarn and textiles, foodstuffs. *Major markets*—FRG, France, Italy, US, UK. *Imports*—$50 billion: crude oil and petroleum products, industrial machinery, iron and steel, foodstuffs, grains, tobacco, motor vehicles. *Major suppliers*—FRG, France, Italy, UK, US, Netherlands, Austria, Belgium.

Official exchange rate (1987 avg.): 1.49 Swiss francs = US$1.

Fiscal year: Calendar year.

Membership in International Organizations

Though not a UN member, Switzerland is party to the Statute of the International Court of Justice, a member of most specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency, and participates in many UN activities, including the Economic Commission for Europe, UN Environment Program, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Switzerland also is party to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and is a member of the Council of Europe, European Free Trade Association (EFTA), Bank for International Settlements, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and INTELSAT.

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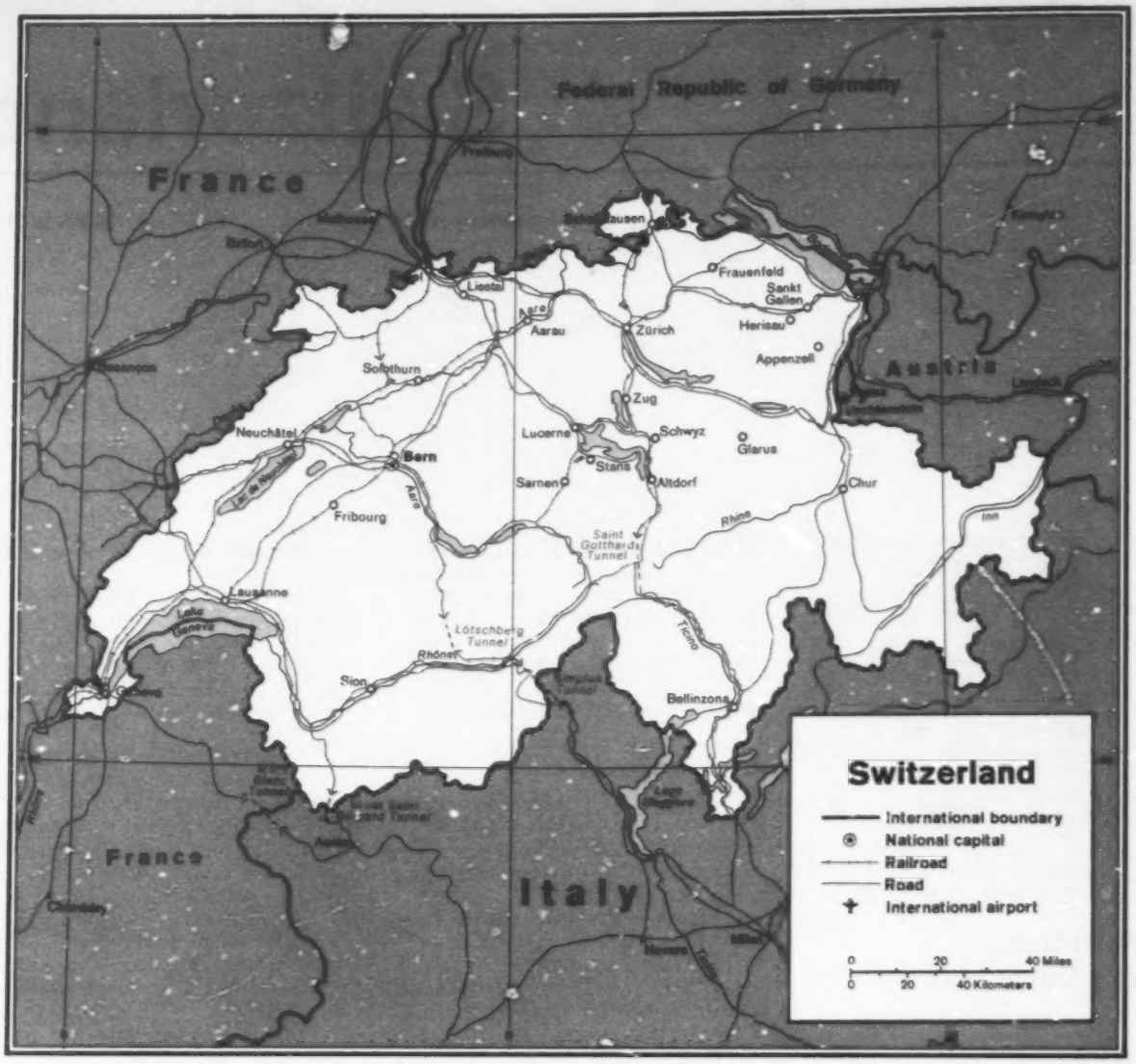


GEOGRAPHY

In the alpine highlands of Western Europe, Switzerland is bounded by the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, Italy, and France. It has been described as the crossroads of northern and southern Europe and is the great European watershed: the Rhine flows to the North Sea; the Inn feeds the Danube; the Rhone empties into the Mediterranean; and the Ticino, which runs through Lake Maggiore, is the source of the River Po.

The Alps mountain chain runs roughly east and west through the southern part of the country and constitutes about 60% of Switzerland's area. The Jura Mountains, an outspur of the Alps, stretch from the southwest to the northwest and occupy about 10% of the territory. The remaining 30% comprises the "Mittelland"—actually a plateau between the two ranges—where the larger cities and the industrial sections of Switzerland are concentrated. The highest point in the country is the Dufour Peak on Mont Rose—4,634 m. (15,203 ft.) above sea level. The lowest point—193 m. (633 ft.)—is the shore of Lake Maggiore in Canton Ticino.

Switzerland's climate is temperate but varies with altitude. During January, the average temperature in Basel—277 m. (909 ft.)—is 0 °C (32 °F); on the Saentis—2,501 m. (8,202 ft.)—it is −9 °C (16 °F). In July, Basel enjoys an average temperature of 19 °C (66 °F), and the Saentis, an average of 5 °C (41 °F). Average annual precipitation ranges from 61 centimeters (24 in.) in Canton Valais to 200 centimeters (79 in.) near Lucerne. Bern and Zurich receive about 150 centimeters (59 in.) per year.

PEOPLE

So many cultures have influenced Switzerland that it is impossible to define ethnic groups. Resident foreigners total about 15% of the population; minority groups in the generally accepted sense of the term do not exist. More than 75% of the people live in the central plain, which stretches between the Alps and the Jura Mountains and from Geneva to the Rhine River.

Switzerland has three official languages—German, French, and Italian, and four national languages—the former three and Romansch (based on Latin and spoken by a tiny minority in Canton Graubuenden). Spoken Swiss German differs substantially from German as spoken elsewhere, varying from canton to canton and even from town to town. Standardized written German is used in some broadcasting, for formal purposes and with foreigners, and is officially the language of instruction in schools. French is spoken in Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchatel, Vaud, and parts of the Valais and Bern Cantons. Italian is spoken in Canton Ticino. Many Swiss speak more than one language; English is widely known, especially among professionals.

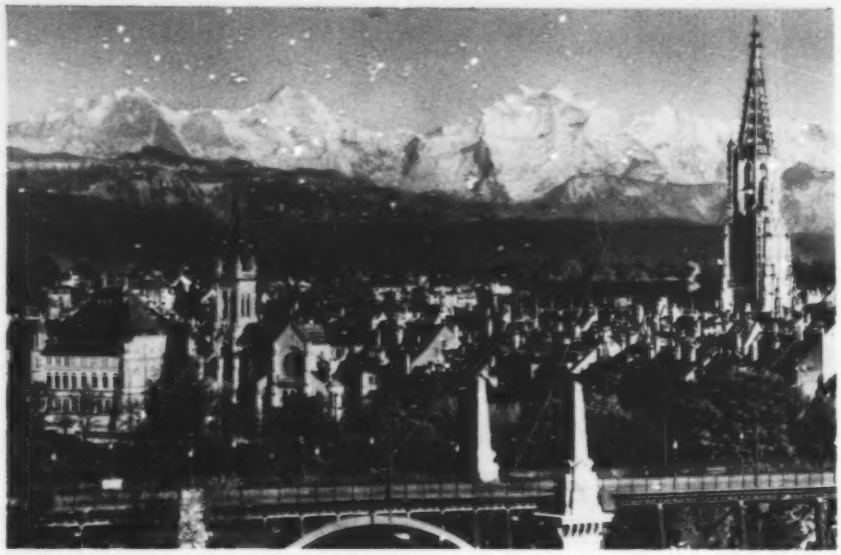
Almost all Swiss are literate. Switzerland's 12 universities had a total enrollment of 76,664 in academic year 1986–87, of which 17.7% were foreign students. Two technical universities and many lower engineering schools provide excellent training for engineers and technicians.

Freedom of worship is guaranteed by the 1874 constitution.

HISTORY

Originally inhabited by the Helvetians, or Helvetic Celts, the territory comprising modern Switzerland was conquered by Julius Caesar during the Gallic wars and was made part of the Roman Empire. It remained a Roman province until the fourth century A.D. Under Roman influence, the Helvetians reached a high level of civilization and enjoyed a flourishing and peaceful commerce. Important cities, such as Geneva, Basel, and Zurich, were linked by good military roads that also served as trade arteries between Rome and the northern tribes.

After the decline of the Roman Empire, Switzerland was repeatedly invaded by Germanic tribes from the north and west. Some of these tribes, such as the Alemanni in central and northeastern Switzerland, and the Burgundians, who ruled western Switzerland, settled there. In A.D. 800, the country became part of Charlemagne's empire. It subsequently passed under the dominion of the German emperors in the form of small ecclesiastical and temporal holdings subject to imperial sovereignty.



A view of the magnificent Alps.

Foundations of Modern Switzerland

In August 1291, on the shores of Lake Lucerne, representatives of the three forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden signed the Eternal Alliance, which united them in the struggle against "foreign" rule by the Hapsburgs, who then held the German imperial throne. At the Battle of Morgarten in 1315, the Swiss defeated the Hapsburg army and secured quasi-independence within the German empire as the Swiss Confederation. During the 14th century, the confederation grew, adding five more cantons, including Zurich and Bern.

By the beginning of the 16th century, Switzerland comprised 13 autonomous cantons and several subject communities. During this period, the Swiss gained renown throughout Europe as excellent soldiers, not only in protecting their own country but also as mercenary troops throughout the continent.

After the disastrous battle at Marignano in 1515, in which Swiss mercenaries fought on both sides, the Swiss cantons gradually began to abandon mercenary service and sought to follow a policy of neutrality toward conflicts between foreign parties.

The religious struggles of the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War, although severe in Switzerland, failed to sever the union. Under the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, Switzerland's independence from the empire and its neutrality were recognized by other European nations.

In 1798, Switzerland was invaded and conquered by the armies of the French Revolution. The Treaty of Vienna and the Second Peace of Paris in 1815 reestablished Swiss independence, and the powers participating in the Congress of Vienna agreed to recognize Swiss permanent neutrality.

Constitutions of 1848 and 1874

Organized as a very loose confederation of 22 cantons in 1815 under the Federal Pact, Switzerland adopted a federal constitution in 1848, modeled in part on the U.S. Constitution. The Swiss amended their constitution extensively in 1874, establishing federal responsibility for defense, trade, and legal matters. Since then, continued political, economic, and social improvement has characterized Swiss history. Determined to preserve their neutrality, the Swiss did not participate in either World War.

Federal Parliament Building, Bern.

GOVERNMENT

Switzerland is a federal state composed of 26 cantons (20 are "full" cantons and six "half" cantons for purposes of representation in the federal legislature) that retain attributes of sovereignty, such as fiscal autonomy and the right to manage internal cantonal affairs. Under the 1874 constitution, the cantons hold all powers not specifically delegated to the federation. In 1978, a new canton—Canton Jura—was created from part of Canton Bern.

Switzerland's federal institutions are:

- A bicameral legislature—the Federal Assembly;
- A collegial executive of seven members—the Federal Council; and
- A judiciary consisting of a single, regular court—the Federal Tribunal—in Lausanne and special military and administrative courts. In addition, the Federal Insurance Tribunal is an independent division for social security questions (the seat of the latter is in Lucerne, but it is part of the Federal Tribunal).

The constitution provides for separation of the three branches of government.

Federal Assembly

The Federal Assembly is the primary seat of power, although, in practice, the executive branch has been gradually increasing its power at the expense of the legislative branch. The Federal Assembly has two houses—a Council of States and a National Council. These two houses of the legislative branch, the only national governmental element having a direct mandate from the people, have equal powers in all respects, including the right to introduce legislation. Legislation may not be vetoed by the executive nor reviewed for constitutionality by the judiciary, but many laws may be reviewed by referendum before taking effect.

The 46 members of the Council of States (two from each canton and one from each half canton) are elected by methods determined by each of the cantons. Direct elections are held in all but a few cantons, where the State Councilors are designated cantonal legislatures. The 200 members of the National Council are elected directly under a system of proportional representation. Members of both houses serve for 4 years.

The Federal Assembly meets quarterly in 3-week sessions and may be legally dissolved only after a popular vote calling for a complete constitutional revision.

All Swiss citizens aged 20 or older have the right to vote unless disqualified by a cantonal legislature. Women were granted the franchise in federal matters in 1971.

A strong emphasis on the initiative and the referendum arises out of the traditional Swiss belief that the will of the people is the final national authority. The constitution provides for:

- A constitutional initiative exercised either by a group of 100,000 voters or by one of the houses of the Federal Assembly;
- A compulsory referendum whereby every constitutional amendment or revision is submitted to popular vote; and
- An optional legislative referendum under which certain types of laws, upon petition by either 50,000 voters or 8 cantons, must be submitted to popular vote following adoption by the Federal Assembly.

As a limitation on the power of referendum, the Federal Assembly can declare an act to be too urgent to allow time for popular consideration. This rarely happens.

Executive

The top executive body is the Federal Council. Although the constitution provides that the Federal Assembly chooses and supervises the Council, the latter gradually has assumed a preeminent role in directing the legislative process as well as executing of federal laws.

The Federal Council has seven councilors elected for 4-year terms by the Federal Assembly. Each year, the assembly elects from among the seven a president and vice president. The member who is vice president one year traditionally is elected president the next. By tradition, no canton has more than one representative in the council, and a rough balance is maintained among major religious and linguistic elements. Under an arrangement that last changed in the 1950s, two Federal Councilors are elected from each of three major parties (Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Free Democrats) and one from a smaller fourth (Swiss People's). Federal Councilors constitutionally act collectively in all matters, not as responsible individual ministers, or as representatives of the parties to which they belong.

Each Federal Councilor heads one of seven federal departments and is responsible for preparing legislation pertaining to matters under its jurisdiction. The president, who concurrently remains responsible for the department he heads, has limited prerogatives and is actually only first among equals. The president presides over the Federal Council, acts on its behalf in rare emergencies, officiates at ceremonies,

and receives foreign representatives; he may not be recalled or impeached.

New governmental responsibilities arising out of an increasingly complex society have been handled by the creation of new subordinate agencies and institutions, rather than by forming new departments. Such agencies fall under the supervision of one of the federal departments.

Judiciary

The administration of justice is primarily a cantonal function. The only regular federal court, the Federal Tribunal, is limited in its jurisdiction. Its principal function is hearing appeals of civil and criminal cases. It has authority to review cantonal court decisions involving federal law and certain administrative rulings of federal departments, but it does not have the power to review legislation for constitutionality. The Federal Tribunal sits at Lausanne and is composed of 30 members elected for 6-year terms by the Federal Assembly.

Local Government

Local government is regulated by the cantons. The basic unit of local government, which administers a village, town, or city, is the commune or municipality. Swiss citizenship is derived from membership in a commune and can only be conferred on non-Swiss by a commune.

The cantons are subordinate to federal authority but retain considerable autonomy in implementing federal law. The structure of cantonal government varies from canton to canton. Most cantonal legislatures are unicameral. In five cantons and half cantons, the legislative function is still performed directly by all voters in a traditional annual meeting, the *Landesgemeinde*. The cantonal executive is a governing board of five to nine members. Communal governments are organized in roughly the same manner, with a small executive grouping and larger legislative council, but, again, considerable variation exists.

Principal Government Officials

Federal Departments
Finance—Otto Stich
Foreign Affairs—Rene Felber
Interior—Flavio Cotti
Justice and Police—Arnold Koller (Vice President for 1989)
Military—Kasper Villiger
Public Economy—Jean-Pascal Delamuraz (President for 1989)
Transport, Communications and Energy—Adolf Ogi

Ambassador to the United States—Edouard Brunner

Switzerland maintains an embassy in the United States at 2900 Cathedral Avenue NW., Washington, D.C. 20008. There also are consulates general at Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, and Swiss national tourist offices in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Although a diverse society, Switzerland has one of the world's most stable governments. Most of its well-educated and politically sophisticated voters support the government in the armed neutrality underlying its foreign and defense policies. Domestic policy poses no major problems. Disaffected elements, such as the communists, form only an insignificant minority. Quadrennial national elections typically result in few major changes in party representation, demonstrating the stability of Swiss political life.

The constitution limits federal influence in the formulation of domestic policy and specifically emphasizes the roles of private enterprise and cantonal governments. However, the confederation has been compelled to enlarge its policymaking powers in recent years to cope with national problems. Increased federal subsidies to education, necessitated by cantonal inability to finance modern institutions, resulted in greater federal influence in education. In 1947, the confederation acquired constitutional authority to formulate agricultural policy and, since that time, has used guaranteed prices, import quotas, and other devices to strengthen the economic position of Swiss farmers. In 1960, the confederation took from private industry principal responsibility for Swiss nuclear energy development. More recently, federal authority in matters relating to environmental protection has been enhanced.

ECONOMY

Switzerland was one of the few West European countries to emerge from World War II with its economic structure virtually unimpaired. Although almost totally lacking in raw materials, it is a well-developed manufacturing country. Its highly skilled labor force forms the backbone of the economy, and the Swiss transportation and communications networks are efficient. Raw materials are imported and high-value finished products exported. Typical Swiss manufacturing and export products are those containing high labor value, such as watches and precision instruments; special quality products, such as chemicals, cheese, and chocolate; and items that do not lend themselves to mass production methods, such as generators and turbines. Other important segments of the economy, which counterbalance Switzerland's usually negative balance of trade, are the tourist industry, international banking, insurance, and transportation.

Switzerland depends on the world economy for its prosperity, as its small domestic market consumes only a fraction of industrial manufactures. Swiss

Travel Notes

Customs: No visa is needed by American citizens traveling to Switzerland.

Health: Immunization against disease is required only if the traveler has passed through an infected area. Health requirements change; therefore, check latest information. Special health measures are unnecessary in Switzerland. Swiss medical facilities are good.

Transportation: Railroads connect the main cities and towns. The Swiss Federal Railway system is entirely electric. Trains are clean and run on schedule; fares are reasonable, with special roundtrip and holiday rates.

Geneva and Zurich are international flight centers, and both airports schedule daily flights to the US. Railroad stations are located in the terminals at both airports.

Local transportation systems—trams, buses, taxis, and commuter lake steamers—are efficient. Swiss roads are good, though often narrow and winding. Traffic moves on the right. A good system of limited-access highways joins the major cities.

Telecommunications: Direct dialing is in use throughout the country and includes international telephone calls. Telegraph service also is excellent. Bern is 6 hours ahead of eastern standard time.

National holidays: Jan. 1, Jan. 2, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whitmonday, Aug. 1 (National Day), Christmas Day, December 26.

exports of goods and services constituted 46% of its GDP in 1987. The Federal Republic of Germany is Switzerland's most important trading partner; the United States ranks fourth. In 1987, the United States received 11.2% of Swiss exports ($3.97 billion) and supplied 5.4% of Swiss imports ($2.68 billion). Swiss trade with communist countries was less than 5%.

After World War II, Switzerland experienced practically uninterrupted economic growth for more than 25 years and now maintains one of the highest standards of living in the world. The influx of foreign workers—about 24% of the work force—did not hamper this prosperity but, by easing chronic labor shortages, supported it. Other expansionary forces at work have included foreign capital inflows, strong investment demand, including construction, and expanding export industries.

As a small, open economy, Switzerland is heavily influenced by international economic developments. A strong Swiss franc has helped hold down import prices, partly accounting for low inflation rates. After some contraction in the early 1980s, economic growth resumed; real growth in 1987 was 2.5% but was less than this in 1988. The average unemployment rate in 1987 was 0.8%.

The European Community (EC) countries are Switzerland's largest trading partners, and under a trade agreement Switzerland eliminated duties on industrial products imported from the EC in 1977. Swiss business and policymakers currently are addressing the detailed technical questions necessary to preserve Swiss access as the EC approaches establishment of its common internal market in 1992. However, an application for actual EC membership is not in prospect for the foreseeable future. Such a step might, according to specialists, hypothetically be reconciled with Swiss armed neutrality but would entail marked changes in the constitutional system of direct democracy. Most importantly, it is generally recognized that the Swiss public is simply unprepared to entertain the idea of EC membership.

Switzerland plays an active role in international financial and trade matters. It is a party to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a member of a number of international economic organizations, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and a donor of growing significance in humanitarian and development assistance.

The Clock Tower—one of Bern's most famous landmarks.

DEFENSE

Switzerland has a 625,000-member militia army. All physically fit male Swiss citizens must serve from age 20 to 50. Civilians with certain occupations are exempt from duty after completing recruit training. Members of the field forces are mobilized for training each year for at least 3 weeks (longer for officers and specialists). There are no full-time active combat units, yet the army is capable of full mobilization within 48 hours. The army is organized into four army corps and an air force. The Swiss armed forces are equipped with modern weapons either of Swiss design and manufacture or purchased from the West.

Direct defense expenditures represent about 2% of the GNP. When the cost to civilian industry of paid personnel absences during annual military service is included in the calculation, the estimated defense expenditure would have to be considerably higher. Constantly modernizing its weapons inventory, Switzerland currently is evaluating various weapons systems, including combat aircraft and light air-defense missile systems. Political and public support for spending sufficient to sustain a credible military capability for defense of the nation's neutrality, and for the armed forces in general, has remained remarkably high and consistent over many years.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

The four declared fundamental principles of Swiss foreign policy are neutrality, universality, solidarity, and participation.

The principle of Swiss armed neutrality has not been seriously challenged since 1815. The rise of Soviet power, however, has compelled the Swiss to interpret that neutrality in light of circumstances that differ from those of 1815.

The Swiss avoid alliances that might entail military, political, or direct economic action against another state or group of states. In recent years, however, the Swiss gradually have broadened the scope of activities in which they feel able to participate without compromising their neutrality. In 1986, a national referendum rejected membership in the United Nations by a 2–1 margin, but Switzerland maintains an observer at UN Headquarters, is party to the Statute of the International Court of Justice, and belongs to most UN specialized agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Switzerland maintains diplomatic relations with almost all independent states and historically has served as a neutral diplomatic intermediary; since 1980, it has represented U.S. interests in Iran. Switzerland has no major disputes in its own bilateral relations with other countries.

The third principle, "solidarity," is described as Switzerland's moral obligation to undertake social, economic, and humanitarian activities that contribute to world peace and prosperity. This is manifested by Swiss bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activity, development and humanitarian assistance to developing countries, and support for the extension of international law, particularly humanitarian law. Switzerland (mainly Geneva) is the headquarters of many international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (whose flag is based upon the design of the Swiss flag, with colors

reversed; the Red Cross historically is a basically Swiss organization).

Finally "participation" (or "engagement") has been expressed by an active Swiss role in various international organizations, programs and conferences—within and outside the UN system—and availability of Swiss good offices to facilitate the resolution of international conflicts.

Under a series of treaties concluded shortly after World War I, Switzerland assumed responsibility for the diplomatic and consular representation of Liechtenstein, the protection of its borders, and the regulation of its customs.

U.S.-SWISS RELATIONS

Switzerland is a democratic country subscribing to most of the ideals with which the United States is identified. Communism has had virtually no appeal for the Swiss. The country is politically stable with a healthy economy. It occupies an important strategic position and possesses a relatively strong military capability. All these factors contribute to the well-being of Western Europe.

U.S. policy toward Switzerland takes these factors into account and endeavors to cooperate with Switzerland to the extent consistent with Swiss neutrality. The first official U.S.-Swiss consular relations were established in the late 1820s; diplomatic relations were established in 1853.

Further Information

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The U.S. consul general at Zurich also is accredited to the Principality of Liechtenstein.

Principal U.S. Officials

Ambassador—Philip D. Winn
Deputy Chief of Mission—Frederick C. Hassett
Political Officer—Sherman N. Hinson
Economic Counselor—Joan Corbett
Financial Attache—William Quinn
Commercial Counselor—Daniel Taher
Public Affairs Officer—Michael Korff
Administrative Officer—Linda S. Taglialatela
Consular Officer—William Muller
Agricultural Counselor—Robert S. Simpson
Defense Attache—Col. Leo T. Weeks, USA
Air Attache—Col. Michael Rhodes, USAF
Consul General (Zurich)—Ruth Van Heuven

The U.S. Embassy in Switzerland is located at 93/95 Jubilaeumsstrasse, 3005 Bern. The U.S. Consulate General is at Zollikerstrasse 141, 8008 Zurich. There also is a U.S. Mission to the European Offices of the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at 11, route de Pregny, 1292 Chambesy. ■

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